

LETTERS FROM READERS

The Vatican and the Jews

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

In these troubled days, when unity among all groups in America is so desperately necessary, it is disturbing to see in a responsible publication such an article as that by L. Poliakov, "The Vatican and the 'Jewish Question,'" in the November COMMENTARY.

Persons of good will in all faiths are bound to take offense at the author's insinuations that the honesty and charity of the leader of the Catholic Church, His Holiness Pope Pius XII, are open to question.

God knows that the treatment of Jews through the centuries by highly placed Catholics, both clerical and lay, leaves much to be desired. Informed persons are not fooled when some Catholics try to dispose of this subject by quoting the words of Pius XI: "Spiritually we are all Semites," and imply that nothing more needs to be said. But Mr. Poliakov is just as far from the truth when he diagnoses the current Vatican attitude toward the Jews as being motivated by the belief that the Jews must be preserved as testimonials to the eventual triumph of Christ, and thus the Church must fight for their right to life, but may allow them to be set apart and humiliated.

It is against this background that Mr. Poliakov sees Catholics doing a thousand brave things to help the Jews flee the Nazi gas chambers, but remaining quiescent in regard to Vichy's anti-Semitic laws. For him this explains both Pius XII's wonderful underground work for the harassed Jews, and also his supposed silence on Jewish persecution, his intransigent stand on Jerusalem, and his issuance (through the Congregation of Rites) of an allegedly insulting decree about "treacherous Jews."

Catholics would ask him to start from an undeniable element of their faith: the law of charity, which absolutely forbids hatred for any class of people or the condoning of such hatred. This is putting first things first, in any discussion of Catholics vis-à-vis the Jews.

The idea that Jews must be set apart and humiliated has had manifestations in various periods of Christian history, particularly in medieval times, but this must be approached with objectivity. The Church acted solely on

religious, not on political or racial grounds, in setting the Jews apart and restricting their influence on the general community. Whether these measures were necessary or not is hard for us to judge today, living in an entirely different pattern of life, but it is demonstrable that the Church sought only to preserve the atmosphere of faith. Excesses there were, because human beings were only too willing to see that the faith was threatened before they would see that the law of charity was involved. The Church, however, never intended any humiliation or persecution of the Jews as human beings.

Poliakov can answer, of course, that he has stated something like this in his article. He can also point to the generous praise he has given to Catholics and Pope Pius XII for their deeds on behalf of the Jews. He can show that he even defends Catholics against the charge that they helped the Jews in order to convert them. But it is the balance that concerns us. From his basic assumption about the Catholic attitude, he inevitably finds us wanting in brotherhood.

Thus, to show that Pius XII did not abhor the Vichy anti-Semitic laws, Poliakov stresses the report of the Vichy ambassador to the Vatican. The possibility that this might be the effort of a diplomat trying to tell his government what it wants to hear is not considered. He ignores the protest of the Papal Nuncio to France, Archbishop Valerio Valeri, who told Pétain in July 1942 that the Pope "asks you to end these inhuman arrests of defenseless people. . . . The Holy Father neither understands nor approves." He has no place for such a statement as that which the *London Jewish Chronicle* carried on September 21, 1942: "A word of sincere and earnest appreciation is due from Jews to the Vatican for its intervention in Berlin and Vichy on behalf of their tortured co-religionists in France. . . . It was a step urged, to their honor, if report be true, by a number of Catholics, but for which we may be sure the Holy Father himself, with his intense humanity and his clear-sighted understanding of the true and deadly implications of the assaults on the Jewish people, needed no prompting. With a courage not always to be observed, he certainly realized that he was by his action only courting a coarse rebuff, and rebuff indeed there was.

But, coming from such characters as Laval and his Nazi master, there was in this failure, far from anything like humiliation, only an implied tribute to the moral steadfastness of a great spiritual power, manifestly doing its spiritual duty. The Pope's action is also a striking application of the dictum of one of the Pope's predecessors, that no true Christian can be an anti-Semite; as well as an implied declaration of the terrible dangers for religion and civilization presented by the anti-Jewish cult."

Poliakov does mention that a group of 72 Jewish leaders visited Pius XII in 1949 to thank him for the aid he gave them during the years of Nazi persecution. An objective observer would accept that as an indication that Pius XII's general attitude, as well as his actual deeds, satisfied these men. But Poliakov only remarks rather sadly that this forces him to refrain from critical comment. An oblique way to put it, but the meaning is plain.

Placing the Jerusalem issue in his peculiar context, Poliakov implies that Pius XII is acting out of spite against Israel when he insists on full internationalization of the Holy City. The Jerusalem question is too big to be argued here. I think that fair-minded Jews, however, will accept the Holy Father's words at face value (against Poliakov's tortured circumstantial evidence) when he says that he has formulated his position on the question from an honest desire to protect Christian interests rather than from a dislike of one of the parties involved.

Poliakov's position is most feeble when he refers to the controversy over the term *perfidii Judaei* in the Good Friday liturgy. His apprehensions that the term would be a noticeable anti-Semitic influence among millions of young Catholics are wildly exaggerated. The term is unknown to at least 99 per cent of the Catholic laity. The controversy, as I am sure most Jews understood and appreciated, was among scholars. The curt reply of the Congregation of Rites which Poliakov complains about was aimed only at scholars. Far from being aroused to stigmatize a modern-day group of people because of what happened on Good Friday, Catholics are taught that the Good Friday drama is one of love for all mankind and that the protagonist in that drama was a Jew.

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Mr. Poliakov Replies

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I believe Mr. Zens' argument may be summarized as follows:

A. We are in agreement that the activities of the Holy See during the past war in the saving of Jewish lives in Europe were in every respect worthy of admiration.

B. We are also in agreement on the historical fact, known universally, that in the Middle Ages the Holy See followed a policy of discrimination and segregation towards the Jews. As Mr. Zens very justly observes, the activities of the medieval church in this respect cannot be judged from our modern point of view, given our entirely different pattern of life. We are also in agreement that the papacy in the Middle Ages acted to protect the lives of the Jews and opposed violence and massacres. I will add also that the papal states were among the very few countries of medieval Europe in which the Jews were spared final outrages and mass expulsions.

C. We are very much in disagreement about the attitude of the Vatican in respect to the new measures of segregation and discrimination of the years 1939 to 1945 in Europe (excluding, of course, violent persecutions and massacres). Mr. Zens believes, if I have understood his letter and its implicit thesis, that the Vatican was opposed to these measures of segregation and discrimination, and because I have reached a contrary conclusion on the basis of the materials that I have examined, he accuses me of "insinuations," "tortured circumstantial evidence," and "wild exaggeration." Let us then examine the facts attentively:

(1) Mr. Zens believes that the report of Ambassador Léon Bérard might have been no more than the effort of a diplomat to tell his government what it wished to hear, and he reproaches me for not having considered this possibility. To tell the truth, I cannot well see what would have led Bérard, who before the war had the reputation of being a serious diplomat, to invent out of whole cloth the considerations which, he says in his report, were presented to him at the Holy See. And I find it equally difficult to see what special satisfaction Pétain might have drawn from these considerations. Neither Bérard nor Pétain was personally anti-Semitic if one can rest any judgment on their earlier records (this would apply equally, by the way, to many another important functionary of the Vichy government, including Laval, who said flatly to the Germans: "I am neither a philo-Semite nor an anti-Semite")—and the real and ineffaceable shame of the Vichy regime lies precisely in its having allowed the persecution of hundreds of thousands of innocent people for motives of mere political expediency, using them as pawns in a cynical horse trade. Let me recall also that Bérard's report contains the sentence: "The concepts of

justice and charity should be taken into consideration in the application of the laws"; I took care to include this sentence in my article.

But there is more to it than this. As I indicated in my article, the Bérard document was published some three years ago in the French press (in particular in the Parisian daily *L'Ordre*), and I will add that I read it also reproduced almost in full in a long letter to the editor published by the *New York Times*. The document has then had a fairly large publicity. If it really constitutes a vicious distortion of the position of the Vatican, as Mr. Zens seems to think, how can we explain the fact that no authoritative voice has ever been raised to inform us of this fact and to contradict and castigate the too imaginative diplomat as he would deserve? Perhaps we may still hope to hear such a denial. In that case, as a historian I shall have been guilty of a false interpretation of a historical document; as a Jew and, I may add, simply as a human being, I shall nevertheless rejoice in my inmost conscience.

(2) On the other side Mr. Zens cites the protest of Archbishop Valerio Valeri of July 1942 (and a comment of the *Jewish Chronicle*). But the text of this protest makes it clear that it relates to arrests and physical mistreatment (that is to say, to point A above, on which we are in agreement), and here again it was necessary that actions of this type should take on openly scandalous dimensions before the Holy See intervened (the first large-scale raids in Paris, in which almost 12,000 Jews were arrested and deported, took place precisely from the 14th to the 16th of July 1942).

(3) On the "question of Jerusalem," Mr. Zens contents himself with saying, "The question is too large to be discussed here." I can all the more easily accept this reservation because, if on other points Mr. Zens has brought against me certain arguments which when confronted with my own will permit readers to form their own opinions, on this particular problem, in response to my documented exposition, Mr. Zens confines himself to pure affirmations.

(4) "Poliakov's position is most feeble," writes Mr. Zens, "when he refers to the controversy . . . relative to the liturgy." "His apprehensions . . . are wildly exaggerated." I do not believe that all Catholics are of this opinion. Thus the Reverend Father Paul Demann, writing on July 17, 1949 in *Documentation Catholique* (the semi-official publication of French Catholicism) at the beginning of a long article entitled "The Jewish Question and Zionism":

"The prayers said for the Jews in the Latin liturgy of the Catholic Church for Good Friday speak of *perfidia Judaica* and of *Judaica perfidia*.

For centuries these expressions were rather widely understood by analogy with phrases resembling them in the modern Romance languages: "perfidious Jews" and "Jewish perfidy." Since the large diffusion of missals translated for the use of the faithful, one can usually read in these translations, therefore, "perfidious Jews," "Jewish perfidy," or similar expressions according to the various languages into which the prayers have been translated.

"These expressions apparently carry a directly pejorative meaning, that of disloyalty, of a lack of good faith, which is not necessarily intended by the original Latin expressions, which mean above all, if not solely, "infidel," "rejection of faith." But only a few philologists, historians, and liturgists are capable of taking account of this misunderstanding, while the unfortunate translations of the liturgical phrases exercise a wide and unhappy influence on Christian sensibilities and ways of talking. [Italics mine.]

"There have been certain reactions to this situation, as, for example, the article 'Perfidia Judaica' by E. Peterson in *Ephemerides Liturgicae*, 1936, or 'Pro Perfides Judaeis' by J. Oesterreicher in *Theological Studies* and *Cahiers Sioniens*, 1947. But these discussions have reached only a few specialists. Most of the popular missals continue to propagate expressions implying perfidy, although there are also some praiseworthy exceptions: for example, the missal most widely used in Germany, that of Dom Schott, was revised during the time of the Nazis when the German Catholics had such good reason to become aware of the harmful effects of such expressions."

ONE sees therefore that this controversy is by no means of concern only to scholars, but, on the contrary, that it holds a very general interest. Perhaps conditions are different in the United States—this is a point on which I am insufficiently documented and perhaps this is the source of Mr. Zens' disagreement with me. In the United States a certain "radio priest," Father Coughlin, had to give up his propaganda of hatred thanks to certain interventions to which, I like to believe, American Catholics were not strangers. In Europe, no one within authorized Catholic circles was able to put an end to the propaganda of hatred of a Monsignor Jouin, of a Canon Rohling, or of that Dr. Lueger, founder of the Austrian Christian Socialist party, whose decisive influence on a certain young Viennese idler is described at length in the autobiographical sections of *Mein Kampf*.

It is true that since the time of Hitler and the war, a certain moral change has taken place in the spirit of Europe. It is towards the promotion and strengthening of this tendency, in

the sense expressed in the generous conclusion of Mr. Zens' letter, that the efforts of all men of good will should be directed.

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Imber and Zangwill

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I found Gerard H. Wilk's article, "The Bohemian Who Wrote 'Hatikvah,'" in the January COMMENTARY, most interesting. Imber was such a character as S. Baring-Gould would have delighted in.

It is natural, of course, that Imber's friends should try to protect him, and it is not at all to Mr. Wilk's discredit that he has inherited (for he did not know his subject personally) this partisanship. Nevertheless, a certain amount of by-passing and glossing over of material has led him to an unworthy denigration of better and greater men than Imber, such as the English scholar and writer Joseph Jacobs and the American jurist, the kindly and cultured Mayer Sulzberger, and particularly to his sneers at a man who has not yet, twenty-four years after his death, been succeeded or superseded by any other Jewish writer, the brilliant, many-faceted Israel Zangwill. Opinions are not arguable, but facts are, and Mr. Wilk's prejudices in behalf of his subject have led him to some egregious errors of fact. On page 54 he mentions that when Imber arrived in "London on the threshold of the 1890's" (the date of Imber's arrival was 1888) the "fastidious and sophisticated readers of *Pall Mall Magazine*" were reading the columns of "twenty-five-year-old" Israel Zangwill (born 1864). The implication that Zangwill was already established in the literary world when he met Imber is untrue. Zangwill had resigned from a position as teacher only a few years earlier and, when he met Imber, had published only *The Premier and the Painter*, a collaboration with Lewis Cowen. His success with *Children of the Ghetto* did not occur until 1892. Moreover his column "Without Prejudice" could hardly have predated the existence of *Pall Mall Magazine* whose publication did not begin until 1893. Also, Zangwill was not the editor of the *Jewish Standard*, as Mr. Wilk implies by writing that Zangwill "invited him [Imber] to write for his *Jewish Standard*," but a contributor under the pseudonym "Marshalik." The *Jewish Standard* was edited by Harry S. Lewis. It is obvious, therefore, that Zangwill, still struggling for recognition and fame, was hardly the "wealthy young Londoner," to quote Mr. Wilk, who could go on indefinitely subsidizing the leeching Imber. . . .

Mr. Wilk also remarks in triumph that Imber's songs are on the lips of a nation while "Zangwill's books are gathering dust on library shelves." So, alas, are the works of Milton and Shakespeare, Dickens and Thackeray, and countless other writers with whom, we trust, Mr. Wilk does not intend to compare Imber. Francis Scott Key wrote the words of "The Star Spangled Banner" and few today read Whitman and Lowell and Emerson, nevertheless he would be bold indeed who championed Key as a poet against any of these. . . . Israel Abrahams' dispassionate appraisal of "Hatikvah" as poetry and as popular song is nearer to the mark than Mr. Wilk's exaggeration of its worth.

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Mr. Wilk's Reply

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Mrs. Jacobs' letter reveals an intimate knowledge of the subject and I would have welcomed an opportunity to discuss it with so well informed a reader before I tried to recapture the spirit of Imber and his day. However, my article is not concerned with the artistic value of "Hatikvah," but was only an attempt to rescue the author of the national anthem of Israel from oblivion. I agree with Mrs. Jacobs that Israel Abrahams accurately appraised the artistic value of the song. He writes, in his article on "Hatikvah": "Throughout its whole range modern Hebrew literature can offer no poem to rival in popularity Imber's song. . . . 'Hatikvah' owes its fame to the directness of its sentiment. . . . The most effective national hymns are not usually the most poetical. . . . There is true art here which I am able to appreciate far removed as I am from Imber's nationalism. . . ."

I would find it regrettable indeed if my article were to be read as an attack on Israel Zangwill, indisputably a great and distinguished Jewish personality. But the fact remains that Imber did feel very bitter about being stigmatized as "Melchizedek Pinchas," the shnorrr-poet of not too high moral qualities. Other contemporaries of Imber shared these bitter feelings and called Zangwill a "ghetto-explorer," which I had duly to report.

Certainly I had not the slightest intention of comparing Imber to "Milton and Shakespeare, Dickens and Thackeray." But is it just to Zangwill to compare *him* to these great writers? Why not measure him, rather, against Sholom Aleichem, whose work remains alive and fresh? Sholom Aleichem, however, has never been called a "ghetto-explorer."

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